

Clinical Topics

Causes and management of anal irritation

JOHN ALEXANDER-WILLIAMS

Anal irritation is principally a skin problem. Most people are aware of how rapidly a severe "nappy rash" will appear in a baby if it is left in a wet or dirty napkin for hours or even minutes. Anal irritation is frequently caused by a condition similar to a nappy rash; the normal resistance of the skin is reduced by moisture or by small particles of faeces that may lurk in the crevices of furrowed skin around the anus. The subsequent irritation leads to scratching, which in turn damages the skin, breaking the surface. This allows germs, which usually abound in the area, to gain access beneath the surface and aggravate the problem. Furthermore, many people apply creams or ointment obtained from their friends, the chemist, or even the doctor. These can damage the skin resistance or perhaps produce an eczema like rash similar to the type of skin allergy that can occur from the use of perfumes or detergents. The principles of treatment are to keep the anal skin clean and dry, to avoid damage by scratching or rubbing, and to avoid applying irritants.

Since the publication of a leading article on pruritus ani I have received many requests for a copy of my "Ten rules" that I said I gave to patients attending the proctology clinic.¹ Here is the instruction sheet that I give to patients after examining them and diagnosing perianal dermatitis.

The 10 rules

(1) *Keep the area clean by washing* after every bowel action and night and morning. The nightly bath is particularly important if you itch at night. A bidet is ideal, but sitting in a bath or a bowl of water is a good substitute. A shower jet is also a useful way of cleaning. Make sure that all the small particles of motion are removed from the skin crevices around the anus.

(2) *Avoid rubbing with a bar of soap* or a rough flannel. Soap remaining in the skin crevices can be very irritating. A few suds in the water and the finger tips, a soft cloth, or cotton wool are all that are needed.

(3) *If you are away from home* or good toilet facilities when you have to pass a motion use medicated wipes such as Wet Ones or Baby Wipes. These provide better, gentler cleaning than hard paper. Take care; some medicated wipes contain surgical spirit and will sting sensitive or raw skin. If you have no wet tissues or cloth you can moisten ordinary toilet tissue with saliva and obtain more thorough gentle cleansing than with dry, hard paper.

(4) *Keep the area dry*—Dab the skin gently with a towel or very soft paper. Do not rub. A hairdryer is the gentlest way of drying thoroughly.

(5) *Avoid excessive moisture*—Never leave a wet dressing on the anal skin. Wear cotton underwear, never nylon. Avoid any firm foundation garment that presses the buttocks together. The free circulation of air will prevent moisture accumulating. For women a loose skirt is better than tight jeans; in the home a long skirt and no pants are even better. Avoid tights, use stockings or crotchless tights.

(6) *After drying gently* place a thin pledget of cotton wool dusted with powder against the anus inside the pants. The pledget should be about twice as large as a 50p piece and should be changed each time you wash.

(7) *Avoid perfumed talcum powder*—This tends to collect into small solid lumps in the crevices and, also, the perfume may cause allergy; even baby powder is not ideal. ZeaSorb (aldioxa) or other drying powders are better. Use ZeaSorb to dust the cotton wool pledget.

(8) *Avoid ointments and creams* unless specifically prescribed by a specialist. Any greasy preparation tends to keep the skin soggy, which is what we are trying to avoid. Many proprietary preparations are hyperallergenic and should be avoided. Lotions may sometimes be prescribed in the acute stage of the condition and are usually applied after cleaning, before drying. A relatively non-allergic anti-irritant cream or lotion is crotamiton which can be used provided the skin is not broken. If the skin is broken or weeping a 1/2% solution of silver nitrate in water or a 50% solution of Castellani's paint (magenta) in water are useful antiseptic drying lotions.

(9) *Keep the bowels regular* and smooth with plenty of fibre (roughage, bran) in the diet. Some dietary items cause irritation or loose motions in some people; avoid anything that does this to you. Do not sit and strain for more than a few seconds when passing a motion; take more roughage if necessary. Coarse bran has flakes which are passed unaltered and may make it difficult to cleanse around the anus. A smooth bulk forming aperient such as Normacol Special, Isogel, or Regular may suit you better.

(10) *Scratching at night* when half asleep may damage the skin. If you find this a problem wear light (cotton) gloves.

As the condition improves, gradually reduce the strict routine described here but remember the principles of keeping the area clean and dry, and avoid damage to the skin by rubbing or medications. If the condition recurs, as it may from time to time, start the routine again at once until the irritation is controlled.

General Hospital, Birmingham B4 6NH

JOHN ALEXANDER-WILLIAMS, MD, FRCS, consultant surgeon

Reference

¹ Alexander-Williams J. Pruritus ani. *Br Med J* 1983;287:159-60.